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Feminisms, the Environment and Capitalism: On the Necessary Ecological Dimension of a Critical Latin American Feminism

By Verónica Schild¹

Abstract

Latin American women are on the move today, taking their demands to the streets throughout the region in unprecedented numbers. What these demands reveal is a growing frustration and anger among women with the distance between official democratic promises and protections and the limited gains in basic rights, even the reversal of minimal achievements in places like Central America and Brazil. Feminists are weaving together different struggles into an intersectional movement explicitly linking gender demands to the end of a neoliberal capitalist model of development and its devastating social, economic and ecological effects on Latin America's overwhelming majority. A critical Latin American feminism aimed at apprehending the present predicament of women in the region, I suggest, needs to extend its commitment to producing knowledge from below and to the left, by reaching further, and engaging critically with Marx and his feminist critics. Given the widespread impact of the present capitalist modernity, tethered to neo-extractivism, not only on the lives of peasant and indigenous Latin Americans but also of increasingly broader sectors of rural and urban society and in particular, on the lives of women, it is imperative that we understand the structural nature of the relation between women, capitalism and nature.

Keywords: Critical Latin American Feminisms, Capitalism, Social Reproduction, Primitive Accumulation, Marx and Nature

Introduction

Latin American women are on the move today, taking their demands to the streets throughout the region in unprecedented numbers. The commemoration of March 8th in particular, since 2015 when Argentine feminists galvanized under the banner "*Ni una menos*" (Not one less), has become a coordinated focal point for women to march together in ever greater numbers. March 8th, 2018 saw demonstrations in every country from Mexico to Central and South America and brought together environmental activists, union members, indigenous and Afro-descended groups, migrants, students and young professionals, all demanding to be heard. An estimated 350,000 women marched in Buenos Aires alone in 2018, another 90,000 in Santiago.² In March of 2019

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² In Chile, the March 8th mobilizations took place in 25 cities. Women marched under the shared banner calling for an end to precarization. These marches were followed on July 9th of 2018 by equally massive ones of feminists demanding that the restricted abortion legislation in place since September 2017 be replaced by free and universal access to

the mobilization of women reached half a million in Chile, with an estimated 400,000 in Santiago alone, making it the largest social mobilization in the country's history. In Chile and elsewhere women demanded sexual and reproductive rights, the right to a life free from sexism and violence, for an end to precarious employment, for food sovereignty, and for water as a right for all. What these demands reveal is a growing frustration and anger among Latin American women with the distance between official democratic promises and protections and the limited gains in basic rights, even the reversal of minimal achievements in places like Central America and Brazil. In fact, these promises, and efforts go back to the UN Decade for Women inaugurated during the first United Nations conference on women held in Mexico City in 1975, followed by the many protocols national governments have signed on to since. They also reveal the extent to which feminist demands have extended beyond gender to encompass broader social, economic and ecological issues.

These massive women's mobilizations are not unique to Latin America. What is distinctive about them, however, is that these multivocal feminisms are linking their gender demands to broader anti-capitalist struggles. As the March 8th mobilizations suggest, Latin American feminists are denouncing the violence used to invade territories, destroy communities, and displace peoples, including the use of sexual violence targeting women explicitly, in the name of development. They are also drawing attention to the devastating effects of large-scale mining, logging, and industrial agriculture that are threatening the viability of human and non-human life alike. Moreover, as rural and urban workers, they are highlighting the institutional violence used for restructuring relations of production and reproduction, and the precarious and exploitative conditions they are forced to work in. In addition, Afro-descendants and indigenous feminists are drawing attention to the particularly harsh forms of discrimination, exclusion and violence that women and their communities face in Latin America today. Thus, feminists are weaving together different struggles into an intersectional movement explicitly linking gender demands to the end of a neoliberal capitalist model of development and its devastating social, economic and ecological effects on Latin America's overwhelming majority.

The context in which an increasingly intersectional movement is mobilizing today is vastly different from that of the 1970s and 1980s. The earlier spaces of women's activism were shaped by the brutal politics of technocratic military dictatorships intent on demobilizing societies, destroying unions, and dismantling the developmentalist model in place, through the use of torture, executions, and disappearances. In a climate of fear and suspicion, women dared to converge on the streets of neighborhoods and cities demanding economic and political justice. They rallied for an inclusive democracy under banners like *Si la mujer no esta, la democracia no va* (Without women, there is no democracy). However, feminist alliances proved to be fragile and short-lived. Processes of political transition in the 1980s opened up spaces for a pragmatic liberal feminist politics focused on achieving "women's equality with men" but which also made visible the social hierarchies and privileges that divided women from the start.³ For nearly 30 years, a transnational feminist project whose goal was advancing an agenda of women's equality with men has been ensconced in institutions and in agencies of the state. It is a project that I have followed closely for the case of Chile since my initial return to the country in 1986 after a lengthy absence. I shared

abortion. An estimated 50,000 to 100,000 women poured onto the streets of cities throughout the country, catching both organizers and the conservative government of Sebastián Piñera by surprise (Segovia, 2018).

³ For a discussion of the configuration of an institutional feminism and a marginalization of others in Chile, for example, see Schild (1996). For an explicit link between the neoliberal project and a pragmatic feminism, see García Castro (2001) and Schild (2015a).

then in the enthusiasm of feminists of my generation in the potential of what was from the beginning a fruitful albeit deeply contradictory class-based political project. For Chile and throughout Latin America, this feminist project would provide valuable cultural resources for adapting societies to neoliberal capitalism. An erstwhile project of emancipation became transformed into a *pensée unique*, a universalizing feminist vision, bolstered primarily by international agreements and funding from multilateral and bi-lateral organizations. This “hegemonic feminism,” to borrow the apt characterization by Mexican feminist anthropologist Aida Hernandez, (Hernandez, 2010) silenced critical strands, and rendered invisible the demands of “popular feminists”, both urban and rural, including indigenous and Afro-descended women.⁴

Today, issues of socio-economic and ecological exploitation, which were always present, but which are now exacerbated, are at the forefront of feminist struggles. A new popular feminism has emerged which encompasses those organizations and projects that include an ecological dimension as part of their struggles, including indigenous organizations, socio-environmental movements and environmental NGOs (Svampa, 2015, p. 128). These resurgent popular feminisms are calling for an end to racist, patriarchal neoliberal capitalism, and they share a common concern for issues of land, territories, bodies and representations (Svampa, 2015, p. 129). Given this remarkable degree of mobilization, and the disappointments of an earlier moment of feminist alliances, the question I want to consider in this article is: under what circumstances can a revived critical Latin American feminism be a meaningful political force for change in the 21st century? This essay suggests that rendering visible the links that connect the diverse struggles of women in rural and urban Latin America is a necessary step for answering this question.

Our critical starting point is the recognition that capitalism is, to borrow Wendy Brown’s expression, our “life form”; in other words, it is the economic and civilizational project that structures the possibilities for life. Moreover, capitalism has always relied on the transformation of nature into resources for exploitation, and, in this sense, it can be said to also shape and transform nature. As Silvia Federici eloquently reminds us, what characterizes neoliberal global capitalism is the fact that “the destruction of life in all its forms is today as important as the proactive force of biopower in the shaping of capitalist relations, as a means to acquire raw materials, dis-accumulate unwanted workers, blunt resistances, and cut the cost of labor production” (Federici 2012, p.103). This unprecedented ecological destruction may in turn signal an epochal, irreversible crisis of capitalist civilization in our own lifetime (Moore, 2015).

The aim of this article is to bring to the foreground an analysis of the links between women, capitalism and the environment as understood by Marx and his feminist critics. The link between capitalism and the environment has been forcefully addressed by popular, indigenous, and communitarian feminist thought, and it is already present in the political agendas of organizations on the ground, in affected rural and urban areas (Erpel Jara, 2018; Ulloa, 2016; and Millán, 2014). More broadly, eco-feminist currents that emphasize the conditions of women have also offered valuable resources for Latin American eco-feminisms.⁵ These preoccupations were central to earlier feminist debates with, and against, Marx which were developed in Europe, North America, and Latin America, but which were set aside much too hurriedly in the 1990s and 2000s. The multiple crises of global neoliberal capitalism today, however, have led to a re-engagement with

⁴ “Popular feminism” refers here to the projects of organized women from poor urban and rural sectors, especially in Mexico, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, and Brazil, who during the 1970s and 1980s sought to articulate their own feminisms. For an overview of earlier fragile alliances and their undoing, see Schild (2015b), and Restrepo and Bustamante (2009).

⁵ See Oksala on “materialist ecofeminism” (2018, pp.218-220).

Marx's analysis of capitalism and its contradictions. Doing so, we are compelled to grapple with "the mutually constitutive intersections and articulations of capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism and racism" (Katz, 2006, p. 239).

Three specific themes of this re-engagement are particularly relevant for the purposes of this article. First is the resurgence of interest in questions which examine the structural links between women's socially reproductive work and capitalism. This emphasis aims to explore the link between those activities "associated with the maintenance and reproduction of people's lives on a daily and intergenerational basis" and the reproduction of capitalism (Ferguson, 2016, p. 27). Second is the discussion of primitive accumulation, or the original stage of capitalist accumulation understood by Marx to be based on predation, fraud, and violence. David Harvey's recent influential re-reading insists with Rosa Luxemburg and others that the process is ongoing and suggests that capitalism "internalizes cannibalistic as well as predatory and fraudulent practices" and that the present moment of global neoliberal capitalism is characterized by entirely new mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2004, pp. 75-76). Moreover, these are processes that involve "important differential treatment of women and men" (Hartsock 2006, p. 177). In fact, as Federici has compellingly argued, the historic changes associated with primitive accumulation mark not only the origins of different social relations, but also their sexual differentiation and, critically, the devaluation of women's labor (Federici 2014). In the case of the Americas, these differential practices constitute a "war on subsistence" waged against indigenous economies, which leaves indigenous women particularly vulnerable (Kuokkanen, 2011, pp. 217-218). And the third theme returns us to Marx's own writings about the real ecological limits of capitalism, which were either misread or dismissed by the 20th century Marxist tradition; these are now being recovered in an effort to come to terms with the unprecedented destructive trends of capitalist economies (Foster 2000; Moore 2015). In these respects, echoing other contemporary critical readers, I read Marx "not as a theoretical authority to be followed but as a theorist who provides an invitation to think about important contemporary issues for both theory and practice" (Hartsock, 2006, p. 169). What might these particular strands of feminist thought, rooted in Marx's historical materialist analysis of capitalist economies, and of Marx's own insights into the ecological limits of capitalism, contribute to a revived critical Latin American feminism?

Thinking structurally about the link between women's oppression and capitalism through the dimensions of social reproduction, primitive accumulation, and the environment is central to the discussion presented in two parts below. In the first section I review key contributions from the long-standing Marxist or socialist eco-feminist tradition that can help us analyze structurally the ecological dimension of capitalism in its present form and the particular position of women's often taken-for-granted and naturalized reproductive work. The second section offers an overview of the ways by which, in present-day Latin America, under "capitalist conditions[,] the environment is more and more transformed into a contested object of human greed" (Altvater, 2007, p. 38), and hence where environmental injustices impact communities, peoples and their livelihoods as an inevitable price of "progress." I argue that to move forward with envisioning political alternatives, a viable anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist Latin American feminist critique of our times requires "confronting head-on the severe ecological crisis that we are currently living through" (Oksala, 2018, p. 217).

Feminism, Capitalism, and Nature

Feminist debates with Marx and the Marxist tradition have sought to locate “the problem of women’s oppression in the theoretical terrain of materialism” (Vogel, 2016, p.19). As Lise Vogel argued, this debate challenged the dominant view on the left that capitalism is indifferent to the gender (or race) of labor, and it sought to employ categories drawn from *Capital* to analyze the structural relation between women (and women’s oppression) and capitalism within a Marxist framework (Vogel, 2016, p.19). Marxist ecofeminists have also developed an argument for the structural relation between nature, women and capitalism. Two concepts from Marx have been key for these debates, “social reproduction” and “primitive accumulation” (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997; Nanda, 1997).

Social Reproduction

Since the 1960s and 1970s, Marxist and socialist feminists have argued that social reproduction cannot be reduced to the realm of consumption, as economic Marxist approaches have done. Taking Marx’s own reference to the realm of social reproduction as complementary to that of production—in *The German Ideology* he characterized social reproduction as “the production of life, both of one’s own labor and of fresh life by procreation”—these feminists argued that the processes of social reproduction are a foundation on which capitalist economies rest. They called for understanding processes of social reproduction as gendered processes, and further, that women’s oppression is in “the very nature of capitalism,” as Alexandra Kollontai had insisted in 1909 (Ferguson, 2016, p. 26). Because the persistent, dominant treatment of processes of social reproduction necessary for capitalist production were regarded as external to the “real” economy, they not only naturalized and rendered invisible a fundamental component of capitalist economies but also devalued the resources contributed to the economy by women.

Recent revivals of discussions about social reproduction have aimed to move beyond older debates. Unquestioned is the understanding that capitalism needs labor power but does not directly produce it. Proponents of a revived debate on social reproduction argue that social relations “outside of the direct labour/capital relation...shape the processes and institutions through which labour-power is (re)produced” (Ferguson, 2016, p.30). Broadly understood, social reproduction “encompasses the activities associated with the maintenance and reproduction of people’s lives on a daily and intergenerational basis”; thus, it encompasses not only the relationships between households and workplaces but all institutions and processes through which labor power is renewed (Ferguson, 2016, 28, p.31). Particularly fruitful for moving a feminist critique of neoliberal capitalism forward is the insistence, by this perspective, of treating gender, sexuality, and race “as concrete relations comprising a wider sociality, integral to the very existence and operation of capitalism and class,” and not as a concurrent system of oppression.⁶ This recent revival of the debate on social reproduction moves beyond the binary framework privileging class and gender, and instead proposes interweaving of gender and class with race, sexuality, colonial and other social relations as constitutive of social reproduction.⁷

Ferguson reminds us that Marx himself questioned abstract generalizations divorced from history and challenges the standard Marxist assumption that capitalism is indifferent to those it exploits. For him, “the task of theory is incomplete if it remains in the realm of the abstract”

⁶ This is the argument of Susan Ferguson, a key figure in spearheading the revival of a feminist analytic tool (Ferguson, 2016, p.29).

⁷ See Ferguson (2016) for an overview and critique of the limitations of the early marxist and socialist feminist debates on social reproduction.

(Ferguson, 2016, p.31) and “exploitation and dispossession exist concretely only in, and through, generalized, systematic, differentiated control and degradation of human life itself. And control and degradation are secured concretely in, and through, the negotiation of race, gender, sexuality, and other layered and interwoven social relations. These are the relations which ensure that labour arrives at capital’s doorstep ready to be further dehumanized and exploited” (Ferguson, 2016, p.31).

That there is “no capitalism outside of history” and that capitalism has many historical forms—as Ferguson concludes—is clearly in the foreground of Latin American analyses. Brazilian Heleieth Saffioti, a contemporary of earlier Marxist feminist debates whose contributions remain ignored outside Brazil, grappled with the complexities and contradictions of women’s position in historically specific capitalist formations.⁸ Using the Brazilian case, she argued that in specific capitalist social formations, pre-existing modes of production co-exist not as separate modes of production, but rather as “certain forms of labour organization, previously integrated in other modes of production” (Gonçalves, 2011, p.124). For her, this explains the persistence of paid domestic work in a place like Brazil--and by extension any other socio-economic system built on a colonial past--as predominantly racialized and undervalued work. Saffioti’s pioneer feminist reading of Marx brings the questions of race and a slave-based mode of production into the analysis of a historically later capitalist social formation. It suggests that race, class and gender-- understood as imbricated with each other, shape the double disadvantage women face in capitalist societies such as Brazil through the sub-valuation of ‘feminine capacities’ and their marginal insertion in the system of production (Gonçalves, 2011, p.125).

Primitive Accumulation

In addition to expanding Marx’s concept of social reproduction, feminists have also challenged the notion of “primitive accumulation” as the historical starting point of capitalism. In *Capital* Marx stated that the initial accumulation of capital was achieved by means of the forceful separation of actual producers from their means of production, through episodes of usurpation of communal lands and natural resources, the expropriation of Church property, the slave trade, the pillage of the Americas and the East Indies, and the “extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines” of indigenous peoples (Ezquerro, 2014, p. 23). Some Marxist feminists argue instead that it is an ongoing strategy that is enacted through processes that are embodied and thoroughly gendered, and in which the state actively intervenes. Moreover, as Maria Mies suggests, a “strategy of dividing the economy up into ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ sectors...has been the method of capitalist accumulation from its beginning and it continues to be the case” (Ezquerro, 2014, p. 24). In *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, Mies argued that women, nature and peoples of the non-West have made up the “invisibilized” basis on which processes of capitalist accumulation have been historically achieved (Mies, 1986). Moreover, these feminists insist that the separation between productive and reproductive labor is, in fact, a fictitious separation as well as a structural aspect of capitalism itself. The reproduction of people’s lives and communities, understood as gendered processes of procuring and caring for individuals and communities for which women worldwide continue to be overwhelmingly responsible, may not produce exchange value directly

⁸ Saffioti’s pioneer work has been part of the debate on paid domestic labor in Latin America, e.g., Chaney and Castro (1989), but her book published in 1978 and subsequently translated into English in abbreviated version as *Paid Domestic Work in Brazil*, is not part of the “canon.” This is a telling blindspot of current attempts to revive marxist feminist debates on social reproduction in Europe and North America (See Saffioti, 1978).

but it does constitute, along with nature, a resource simply taken as “freely available like air and water” (Mies, 1986, p.110).

In a similar vein, Silvia Federici has argued that primitive accumulation needs to be understood “as the development of a new sexual division of labour that created divisions and hierarchies within the working class” (Ezquerro, 2014, p. 25). Whereas Marx approached the origins of capitalism focusing on primitive accumulation from the perspective of the making of a waged proletariat and the development of commodity production, she begins “with the changes it introduced in the social position of women and the production of labour power” (Federici, 2014, p.12). Capitalism, then, “was based not simply on proletarianization of working-class men and women, but also on the fictitious separation between productive and reproductive work, their attribution to men and women respectively, and the invisibilization and subordination of women for the sake of men” (Ezquerro, 2014, p. 25).

Building on this feminist critique of primitive accumulation, feminists have focused explicitly on the relation between women, capitalism and nature. Ecofeminist Ariel Salleh, for example, argues for a complex understanding of reproductive labor that recognizes that women, as the ones who overwhelmingly carry out these activities, occupy a position “as mediators of nature” that is a “prior condition for the transaction that takes place between capitalists and laboring men” (Salleh, 2005, p.11). She focuses explicitly on unwaged labor and argues that it is a type of work which “directly manages biological exchanges of the humanity-nature metabolism” (Salleh, 2006, p.118).

Marx and Nature

The material relation between humans and nature was central in Marx’s understanding of history and, by extension, the question of capitalism and the degradation of the environment is one he cared deeply about (Foster, 2000). Today, the relation between capitalism and the environment has come to occupy a central place in the search for a materialist understanding of the implications of accumulated effects of global neoliberal capitalism on the lives of ecosystems and communities, and on the very possibility of life as such. If the pattern of capitalist development has been one of using new technologies and new ways of organizing power relations and production to resolve older crises, and to put nature to work in new ways, critics suggest that this may have come to an end with the unfolding of neoliberal capitalism. The crisis today is an “epochal” one that has reached planetary proportions; capitalism, they suggest, may have reached its end point.⁹ Jason Moore, capturing a widespread concern, states that:

We may be experiencing not merely a transition from one phase of capitalism to another, but something more epochal: the breakdown of strategies and relations that have sustained capital accumulation over the past five centuries (Moore, 2015, p.1).

For both capital and for government regulatory agencies, environmental degradation is an ecological and social cost external to production. The effects of production and consumption on society and nature, which “are irrelevant for capitalist decision-making, so long as they remain “external” to the calculations of single firms,” trigger attempts at regulation only when they add up (Altvater, 2007, p.48). Indeed, this view of the environment and the economy is shared by orthodox economic theory in general and helps shape the neoliberal global capitalist project. It is, by extension, a key assumption of the myth of development. In other words, “ecological

⁹ For a critical review, see Foster (2016).

destruction is built into the inner nature and logic of our present system of production” and this is what makes it so difficult to solve (Magdoff and Foster, 2010, p.6). As Magdoff and Foster forcefully remind us, “no-growth capitalism is an oxymoron” because this economic system is premised on continuous expansion: the “environment exists, not as a place with inherent boundaries within which human beings must live together with earth’s other species, but as a realm to be exploited in a process of growing economic expansion” (Magdoff and Foster, 2010, p.6). And, as Mies forcefully argued, alongside with reproductive labor, nature is thus externalized and treated as a freely available resource.

In *The German Ideology* and the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx provided a strong critique of the conventional dualistic view of nature and society. The view that nature lies outside society, and is there to be dominated by “man,” was for Marx part of a “bourgeois ruse.” Marx argued against the assumption that society and nature exist as two distinct entities and proposed instead that they are in a dialectical relation. Moreover, this relation is constantly changing, for, as “human beings interact with nature through labor, both the individual and nature are changed” (Brown, 2014, p.3). Contrary to the view entrenched in the entire critical tradition of the twentieth century, Marx cared deeply about the environment, and about the serious threat posed by the capitalist model of accumulation to the balance, or metabolism, in which humans and the environment necessarily coexist.

Although Marx addressed the structural relation between nature and capitalism through his concept of the metabolic rift, Silvia Federici argues that the metabolic rift is itself a concrete historical process, one furthermore with fundamentally different effects for the lives of women and men. For her and other feminists, working with Marx has meant also working against him to render visible the place of women in the transition to capitalism (Federici, 2014, p.12). More recently, philosopher Johanna Oksala asks for a reevaluation of a materialist eco-feminism that builds critically on this feminist debate with Marx (Oksala, 2018). She suggests that an updated and revised Marxist ecofeminism, one that recognizes and accounts for “the different, sometimes contradictory mechanisms for the capitalization of nature that have become prominent today,” can help us advance an ecofeminist argument which is relevant for our present (Oksala, 2018, p. 217). What is needed, Oksala tells us, is a critical analysis of capitalism that is capable of “providing a rigorous argument for why this connection is nevertheless structural and not merely historically contingent or accidental.” A Marxist ecofeminism offers such an argument by putting forward a “structural argument about the connections among capitalism, gender oppression, and environmental destruction” (Oksala, 2018, p.217).

In summarizing the Marxist ecofeminist argument, Oksala states that it “contends that, in addition to the appropriation of surplus value produced by wage-labor, capitalism relies on the ongoing and violent expropriation of women, indigenous peoples, nonhuman animals, and the biosphere” (Oksala, 2018, p.222). Adding to Oksala, Meera Nanda insists that in our discussions of the oppression of women and the devastation of nature, we must strive not to take experiences of nature as we find them, “but instead try to understand their historical origin and their place in the totality of relationships” (Nanda, 1997, p.366). This is particularly relevant for grappling with the post-colonial Latin American experiences because the region as a whole—from the moment of occupation by European powers in 1492—has been transformed by the plundering of resources, the destruction of pre-existing forms of life, and the suppression of other forms of knowledge and culture. Furthermore, despite UN covenants and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples acknowledging that indigenous peoples have a right “to engage freely in their traditional

and other economic activities”, the processes of neoliberal global capitalism routinely ignore and trample these rights (koukkanen, 2011, p. 230).

Latin American ecofeminist activists and critics are addressing the specificities of the “voracious” capitalist formations in place today throughout the region. They are building an “embodied” understanding of the devastating effects for women and the nature of resource exploitation through a turn to materialist ecofeminist debates, especially eco-feminisms “from the South”.¹⁰ In line with eco-feminist appropriations of the notion of primitive accumulation, they argue that the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women are key dimensions of patriarchal extractivist capitalism. The question remains, however, what comprises the structurally systemic character of these relations. Answering this question requires a Marxist historical materialist approach which recognizes the function that the naturalization of women’s socially reproductive labor plays in contemporary neoliberal capitalism. I suggest that the concept of social reproduction is of particular value for understanding not only the gendered impact of the capitalization of nature in rural and urban Latin America, but also the fundamental transformations in the organization and reproduction of social life, including in the provisioning and caring for people and communities, which in turn structure women’s lives differently from men’s, and have unequal impacts on them.

The New “Myth” of Development in Latin America and the Costs for Women

In his book, *Las Ilusiones de la Modernidad*, Ecuadorian Marxist philosopher Bolívar Echeverría observed that the “objective form of the modern world...is dominated by the presence of the reality, or the fact of capitalism”...and, if this is the case, “assuming the fact of capitalism as the necessary practical existence of all things, [therefore] consists in developing an ethos or spontaneous behavior capable of integrating it as that which is immediately acceptable, as the taken-for-granted and safe basis of everyday life” (Echeverría, 1995, pp.165-166). At no time has this claim been more relevant to characterize Latin America than it is today. By the beginning of the 21st century capitalism in its present form there had become a dominant strategy of accumulation as well as a social and civilizational project.

Neoliberalism as a transnational political-economic project (first implanted by Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile in the 1970s) has served to justify and legitimize efforts to reestablish the conditions for capital accumulation and to install market values as the *sine qua non* of modernity. It has allowed for the removal of barriers to capital accumulation, and the expansion and deepening of markets, thus actively enabling the restoration of power to dominant economic groups. Consequently, as some of us have argued for some time, neoliberalism is much more than a program for resetting the economy, or an ideology. It is a normative order of reason that has developed “over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality” that “transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic” (Brown 2015, pp.9-10; Schild, 2007; 2016). At the service of capital accumulation, it is a cultural-political project for adapting societies to the market.

Generally in Latin America today, neoliberal capitalist development is tethered to a model of economic growth premised on the overexploitation of natural resources for export, on the displacement of communities, and on the precarization of work.¹¹ “Extractivism” is the term

¹⁰ The incipient Latin American ecofeminist debate is succinctly summarized by Svampa (2015) and León (2009).

¹¹ As regards the precarization of work, the estimate of total employment as informal employment for the region today is 53.1 percent, according to ILO figures for 2018, with considerable country-based variations. Thus, while in Uruguay

widely used in Latin America to describe a model of development that relies on the export of raw materials as the engine of economic growth. And, “neo-extractivism” captures the present economic strategy through which Latin American economies are linked to global markets and an accelerated “overexploitation of natural resources that are to a large extent non-renewable, and on the expansion of frontiers to territories that were previously considered ‘unproductive’” (Svampa, 2013, p.34). The overexploitation of land for biochemically driven, mass scale agriculture, massive scale mining, and hydroelectric projects, all threaten livelihoods, agriculture, and even primary sources of drinking water for vast populations. Moreover, there is a shared perception which is part of the “myth of development,” that there are areas that are inevitable “zones of sacrifice” for the national good. Multilateral funding agencies like the World Bank and its for-profit investment arm, International Finance Corporation, have been shown to participate in the perpetuation of this myth—in the name now of promoting “sustainable development”—and to contribute, however indirectly, to “the destruction of the environment” and the economic and physical displacement of peoples in Latin America and elsewhere (Hallam and Olivera, 2015). This development model has had very different consequences for women and men.

The radical transformations brought about by neoliberal restructuring and the multiple environmental impacts of resource overexploitation have fundamentally changed the spaces and conditions for the maintenance and reproduction of society. Women are being incorporated in unprecedented numbers into rural and urban wage labor but for the overwhelming majority this means working under precarious and highly exploitative conditions. Moreover, given the absence of public provision of care, households are drawn to the market for basic provisioning and consumption, and for low-income households this means recourse to credit and cash based social assistance, but at the cost of new forms of indebtedness. These practices which aim to supplement inadequate levels of household income and, in the case of rural households, to compensate for the loss of alternative subsistence strategies, are overwhelmingly women’s responsibility. And they add to the unremunerated and largely invisible housework and care responsibilities women are responsible for, which today include absorbing the impact of environmental degradation. Clearly, these transformations have had contradictory effects for the majority of women in Latin America, opening up new possibilities for agency, yet also new problems in the form of additional house work and care burdens, as well as exposure to intensified domestic and structural forms of violence.

The neo-extractivist development project is premised on the use of violence, which is used indiscriminately in the identification, expropriation and transformation of natural resources into private property as commodities to be exported, including biological material, minerals, metals, hydrocarbons, in addition to large-scale cultivation of vegetables, fruit and forage, and industrial-scale fishing. Violence, including sexual violence, is widely used for accessing territories, and expelling or displacing residents of rural and indigenous communities. These activities have resulted in the contamination and depletion of water sources, the erosion of agricultural lands and destruction of native forests, in addition to the contamination of oceans. Today, these unsustainable economic activities are acutely felt by women, who are responsible for ensuring the well-being of their families through their unremunerated and largely taken for granted every day activities, in

the ILO estimates that 24.5 percent of employment is informal, the figure for Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua is close to 80 percent (ILO, 2018, p. 33). These reports also indicate that women’s participation in the labour force increased to 52.6 percent in 2015 from 44.5 percent in 1995, and that more women than men are engaged in informal employment (ILO, 2016). In Central America, women constitute the vast majority of those engaged in informal employment in the formal sector, as manufacturing workers in special Free Trade Zones.

addition to tending to their lands, and contributing to the household economy by being employed as rural workers or in nearby towns. Why women should be so directly involved in these struggles is a question that is typically overlooked in debates on new environmental social movements, revealing the persistent invisibility and naturalization of reproductive work for which women continue to be primarily responsible. Women have been particularly affected by these transformations and they are at the forefront of local forms of resistance in environmental movements and in indigenous struggles for territory and autonomy throughout the region. It is in this context that I argue that resurgent Latin American feminisms must engage with the environmental dimension of capitalism if they are to become a relevant political force for change in the 21st century.

Mining offers a powerful case of environmentally and socially unsustainable neo-extractivism. Its damaging activities, including the expansion of a dangerous process of land appropriation and devastation of biodiversity, are behind the expulsion or displacement of rural, peasant or indigenous communities, and violate citizen decision-making processes (Svampa, 2013, p.34). Peru is a paradigmatic case in point. By 2013, 45 percent of indigenous territories had been provided as concessions to mining operations. Furthermore, 75 percent of the Amazon region is controlled by oil consortia; mining concessions occupy 21.02 percent of the national territory (Gudynas, 2015, p.16). In Guatemala alone, 500,000 people had been expelled from their communities by 2012, a case that is dramatically illustrated by a Maya Q'eqchi community involving a subsidiary of Canadian owned Hudbay Minerals. In 2010 a group of women from the village Lote 8, with the support of the Canadian-based human rights organization Rights Action and represented by the legal firm Klippensteins Barristers & Solicitors, succeeded in having their civil suit against the company heard in the Canadian courts for the violence they suffered during the forced evictions conducted on behalf of the company. In this case, eleven women were raped during the illegal burning and destruction of their village in January of 2007, and the leader of the community was subsequently shot dead in 2009.¹² The case is presently making its way through the courts.

Local rural and urban communities and peoples in areas adjacent to large-scale economic exploitation are expected to live with the often-devastating impacts to their health and livelihoods of contamination and resource depletion. The most recent environmental accident in Quintero, in the region of Valparaíso, Chile in August of 2018 offers a dramatic illustration. A cloud of sulfur dioxide was accidentally released into the air resulting in the severe intoxication and hospitalization of school children. This coastal region of central Chile had been developed since 1961 as an industrial park critical for the development of the country, adjacent to the country's principal seaport, considered today to be the largest on the west coast of the Americas. The region has the highest national concentration of hydroelectric generating plants and mineral processing plants in Chile, ranging from natural gas, petroleum, coal, and copper among others. The levels of soil, water and air pollution are extreme in an area that is regarded by dominant social and political sectors, and the Chilean state, as an inevitable "zone of sacrifice" for the sake of national development.¹³ Of course, it bears repeating that sacrifices here as elsewhere have been made by local inhabitants without economic or political power, and that from a feminist perspective, it comes as no surprise to learn that women are at the forefront of these struggles against contamination and for environmental justice.

¹² For an overview of these events, see Defensora, an award winning documentary from 2013. <https://vimeo.com/75725049>

¹³ On the use of "zones of sacrifice" in Chile, see López (2018); López Carmona (2017); Mundaca (2014).

As Eduardo Gudynas, a main exponent of the argument about neo-extractivism suggests, beyond these localized, territorial impacts there are “spillover” effects of the promotion of extractivist projects that are multidimensional, affecting social, economic and environmental practices, and that are felt throughout national territories.¹⁴ Moreover, because of the levels of corruption affecting all governments in Latin America as corporations curry favors with governments to ignore the needs and demands of ordinary citizens, these spillover effects also spread to the political realm, undermining the quality of democratic politics itself. This was dramatically illustrated by the blatant and shocking murder in 2016 of indigenous and environmental activist Berta Cáceres in Honduras. Her killing was by no means an isolated case, but it brought to light the lengths to which governments will go, in the name of the national interest, to push for powerful economic interests. Cáceres’s murder underscored the scope of government plans to meet the demands for energy of the large mining sector by offering concessions to the private sector for building 11 hydroelectric dams. In fact, Honduras has seen an explosive growth in mega projects since the coup of 2009, when almost 30 percent of the country’s land was earmarked for mining projects that would displace indigenous communities. Cáceres was assassinated for opposing the largest dam project in Central America, and international condemnation of her murder and details about her activism have made visible the brutal costs of projects that are funded and defended as contributing to sustainable development. Hydroelectric projects are proliferating throughout Central America and are being developed in the name of promoting sustainable development--a new twist on the myth of development--but without any regard for the well-being and legal rights of indigenous communities or local economies. Indeed, 101 hydroelectric dam projects are either in the planning stages or being built in Panama, 60 in Costa Rica, more than 30 in Nicaragua, more than 50 in Guatemala and Mexico, and over 20 in El Salvador (Raimbeau, 2016, p.14). The goal is to connect the multiple hydroelectric generating plants along an 1,800 km corridor and promote a regional energy market from Panama to Guatemala.

Land re-concentration and the rapid development of export-oriented large-scale agriculture have also contributed to the displacement of communities and destruction of livelihoods and the environment. In Brazil and Argentina, for example, the adoption of genetically modified crops in 1996 and 2006, respectively, led to a rapid conversion to a new model of agricultural production, premised on the accelerated commodification of seeds and land and integration into a global food market. Today, these countries are the second and third largest exporters, respectively, of soy in the world. Chile, the region’s pioneer in non-traditional agricultural exports, is a major exporter of genetically modified seeds which have become the third most important export crop, after fruit and wine. Large tracts of land are devoted to different GM mono seed production, particularly in the most northerly region of Arica-Parinacota, making Chile the major exporter of GM seeds in the Southern Hemisphere, and the world’s fifth largest. The loss of biodiversity and contamination from pesticides are major concerns for environmentalists, indigenous peoples, and small farmers (many of whom are indigenous). In fact, though most indigenous people in Chile today live in urban centers, many of them have been displaced from farming in a country where the steady decline of family farming is a serious concern.¹⁵ Women organized through ANAMURI

¹⁴ This helps us understand how the extractivist model expands, Gudynas tells us. For example, relaxing environmental regulations, or redefining territories and their uses, to promote a particular project, ends up benefitting other powerful economic players wanting access. The case of Peru offers sobering figures, quoted in Gudynas (2015, p.16).

¹⁵ This is corroborated by Francisca Rodriguez, member of ANAMURI and also a founding member of Via Campesina. In an interview in 2014, she pointed out that the majority of campesinos in her organization also live in

(*Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas* (the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women) are at the forefront of efforts to save seeds, struggle for food sovereignty, and demand land reform. As Alicia Muñoz, Co-Director of ANAMURI reminds us, “big agriculture is just that, a business. It doesn’t feed our country” (Du Monthier, 2014).

Today, women play a critical role in the growing mobilization of rural peoples struggling against neoliberal rural transformation, and they are joining national as well as continent-wide organizations. For example, the Coordinadora Latinoamericana of Organizaciones del Campo, CLOC, which was created in 1994, is a regional network that brings together over 84 organizations of peasants and rural workers, including Afro-descendants and indigenous workers. Indeed, organized rural people from Latin America have taken their struggles in defense of peasant and rural worker rights and food sovereignty to the global stage, through Via Campesina, an international movement that coordinates the efforts of organizations from 81 countries that fight for climate and environmental justice, for the rights of peasants, for an end to patriarchal capitalism, and against the dominant model of agricultural development.

There is perhaps no case more emblematic than that of water, and its overexploitation as a resource, to underscore the irreversible ecological destruction wreaked by neo-extractivist capitalism. Once again Chile offers a powerful illustration. The country has some of the largest sources of fresh water in the world, yet this does not mean that everyone has access to it, or that it is fairly distributed. Under Pinochet, the neoliberal constitution he imposed in 1980, along with the *Código de Aguas* or Water Code of 1981, created the framework for the privatization and regulation of water that is still in place today. This legal framework allowed for the transformation of water into a tradable commodity, and thus the creation of a powerful and competitive water market. As in Central America, the main beneficiaries are not communities or small farmers but powerful national and transnational corporations, in this case those specializing in export agriculture, mining, and timber. Today, most of the country’s water basins are overexploited and entire communities have had to adapt to living without water for most of the year. In fact, during the period from 2010 to 2015, “more than 108 communities throughout the country were declared in a state of agricultural emergency by the Ministry of Agriculture, more than 20 were declared zones of catastrophe (*zonas de catastrofe*), and five areas were prohibited from accessing subterranean sources of water by the *Dirección General de Aguas*, DGA (the National Water Directorate)” (Mundaca, 2014, p. 15).¹⁶ Entire districts or *comunas* in the central and northern parts of the country are today supplied through water transported by trucks.

Neoliberal extractivist capitalism has had a fundamental impact on the reorganization of rural and urban spaces, with powerful effects on those activities necessary for the reproduction of society. The radical transformations in rural areas in Latin America discussed above have led to a process of outmigration, and today less than a fifth of the region’s population live in rural areas. As Cristóbal Kay suggests, the peasantry has not disappeared, but it has been substantially changed (Kay, 2015, p.76). In fact, a process of transformation of peasants into rural workers has been taking place, as well as a feminization of agriculture, and “most peasant farms are only able to subsist today through wage income, remittances, State pensions and government anti-poverty programs” (Kay, 2015, p.76; Kay, 2006, pp. 470-472; Tzul Tzul 2010, p. 37; Deere, 2005). Furthermore, increasingly fewer workers employed in the rural sector actually live there. Most have moved to urban centers, swelling the size of towns and cities. Today, Latin America is

urban areas, and that more or less 35% of the organization are Indigenous women (Interview, Motion Magazine January 8 2017).

¹⁶ For a study of the regulation of water in Chile, see Bauer (2004).

considered to be the most rapidly urbanizing region in the world, with an estimated four fifths of its population living in towns or cities. According to figures from 2012, an estimated 111 million out of a total of 580 million inhabitants live in shanty towns, with inadequate housing or basic infrastructure, and with lack of access to employment. Furthermore, studies persistently show that the Latin American region is the most unequal in the world, where existing forms of inequality and exclusions have intensified, and new forms have been generated (Bárcena and Prado, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, Latin American states and cities are facing a public security crisis and the region is now the most violent in the world, with 17 of the 20 most violent countries, and 43 of the 50 most violent cities, according to a recent study.¹⁷ In Mexico, Central and South America homicide, victimization and restricted freedom of movement and association have risen (Muggah and Aguirre Tobon 2018). Furthermore, violence directed at women because of their gender is also on the rise across the region. According to figures from the Gender Equity Observatory of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), in 2017 alone at least 2,795 women were femicides in 23 countries, and there is escalation of this lethal violence in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Chile, among other countries (ECLAC 2018). Despite the existence of laws on prevention, attention to and punishment of gender-based violence at the national level, and the agreement in place in the region since 1994 (the Inter-American Convention of Belem do Pará), the number of murdered women and girls continues to rise (ECLAC 2018).

The official response to insecurity, turning to the militarization of policing and the criminalization of poverty and dissent, has exacerbated the problem. This security approach works in tandem with efforts to expand prisons and modernize the police and penal systems throughout Latin America (Müller 2012). Studies show that although males constitute the great majority of those in prison throughout Latin America, women are the fastest growing group, and that they land in prison for participating in retail drug dealing (*narcomenudeo*). Many of them are sole income earners in their families, supporting not only children but also elderly parents, and therefore this punitive approach has devastating ramifications for them, their families, and for society (Hernández 2010: 11; Villarrubia 2011a, 2011b). Incarceration, then, is another form of violence imposed on women, especially those from poor and racialized groups. In sum, a region characterized as the most unequal and violent, urban spaces concentrate inequality and violence, and women bear the brunt of this brutality.

Women have been a key factor in the strategy of cheapening labor. Women have joined the labor market in unprecedented numbers, and many are forced into employment that is characterized by “low wages, long working hours, substandard working conditions, lack of social protections” and “discriminatory practices.” (ECLAC, 2018, p.192). Employment in the formal sector of the economy is no guarantee of basic rights and protections or living wages. In fact, informality is increasingly the norm both in the public and private sectors. As the ILO report *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture* (2018) admits, “[m]ore than 60 percent of the world’s employed population earn their livelihood in the informal economy,” something that occurs in every country. Latin America is no exception. According to the ILO figures, women are overrepresented in all types of informal sector employment, including in “informal employment in the formal sector” which it cautiously observes is “relatively high” in Latin America, especially in Central America (ILO, 2018, p.34; ILO, 2016).¹⁸ As Latin America

¹⁷ Figures from a report on violence in Latin America by the Brazil-based think tank Igarape Institute, as quoted in the Washington Post (Erikson 2018). See Muggah and Aguirre Tobon (2018, p. 18).

¹⁸ An estimated 54.3 percent of women to 52.3 percent of men work in the informal economy in the entire Latin American region; the figures for Central America are 61.8 percent and 55.6 percent respectively (ILO, 2018, p. 34).

participates in the global “trend of economic restructuring shift away from agricultural work”, women join the labor force in unprecedented numbers with unprecedented levels of formal education, the vast majority of them continuing to toil in the most precarious forms of employment. These trends fly in the face of decades of “gender-sensitive” social policy interventions to “empower” the poorest among them, and “ready them” for the job market.

Given the widespread precarization of the conditions of life, households have become increasingly dependent on access to credit to meet basic consumption needs. Cheaper household products and foodstuffs are available through small and large retailers which are often offshoots of transnationals themselves. Walmart is a case in point. It is one of the largest retailers in Latin America, with the exception of Brazil. And, it is also a major employer that justifies its massive presence in the region as an engine of market-driven development. In the words of its CEO for the region, “We’re committed to supporting the emerging middle classes throughout Latin America by promoting socioeconomic development via supercenters and smaller store formats. Through our smaller formats, we can offer an assortment of goods more oriented to the basic grocery products every family needs on a daily basis, with lower prices, high presence of private brands and bulk volume.”¹⁹ Walmart moved into the region after the financial crisis of 2008, when the drastic deterioration of incomes for Latin America’s majority created a major investment opportunity. As Pablo Naranjo, a professor of business at the Adolfo Ibáñez University, in Santiago, explained at the time:

Income distribution in Latin America has deteriorated a great deal in recent years. If the current crisis is affecting every layer of society, the most disadvantaged segments of the population are looking for more access to credit in order to stay afloat, especially when it comes to food.

Naranjo added, “Wal-Mart can be an attractive alternative for the population because of its leadership in [low] costs. But it will have to accompany its supply [of low-cost products] with options for credit, as it has done in Chile.”²⁰

Anti-poverty programs which offer cash instead of services, or Conditional Cash Transfer programs, widespread after the 2008 economic downturn, have themselves become a mechanism for building debt by acting as collateral for debt accumulation (Lavinas, 2013). Women are the preferential targets of private and public sector “economic empowerment” strategies. Brazilian feminist economist Lena Lavinas has suggested that commodification is reaching all the way down, and that its acceleration extends a narrow finance-led market-oriented thinking to the production of goods, ultimately reframing concepts such as rights (Lavinas, 2015, p.213).²¹ Thus,

According to the ILO, “informal work” is defined today to include not only employment in the informal sector proper, that is, subsistence activities outside the formally regulated economy, but also work contributed by family workers in households (for example, in family microenterprises), and informal work in the formal sector.

¹⁹ “Interview with Enrique Ostale”, *Latin Trade* (April 19, 2017).

²⁰ Naranjo quoted in “Walmart’s Next Conquest: Latin America” (Knowledge@Wharton, March 25, 2009).

²¹ On the link between social programs, social integration, and politics in Chile, see also Schild (2018; 2007; 2000). Studies conclusively show that the poorest have the highest levels of debt, and among them, those receiving social assistance are the most indebted. Furthermore, they show that this segment of the population relies on debt to pay for food and to make ends meet. Today, the push to social integration through financialization, or “financial democratization”, includes the right of all Chileans to own a “Cuenta RUT”, a basic bank account and ATM card with the BancoEstado, the institution that has ATMs throughout the country.

precarious relations of production and of consumption are two sides of the impact of neoliberal capitalism in Latin America.

Concluding Remarks

Feminism has undeniably become a powerful political movement throughout the region, and as discussed before, it is characterized today by the diverse voices which identify, and speak to, multiple forms of oppression which come together on the ground in a movement for change that is both anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist. Increasingly prominent are the contributions made by indigenous environmental struggles, and the activism of women who are at the forefront of struggles against the repeated violations of the basic rights of rural and indigenous communities by large mining, timber, and agricultural businesses. Indigenous feminist denunciations of the devastating environmental impact on the health, livelihood, and survival of their communities are pressing, more urgently than ever, the fact that environmental issues cannot be treated as secondary to feminism.

Since the 1990s, our readings “from the South” of approaches to the study of power, the configuration of subjectivities, and the interweaving of colonial hierarchies with ostensibly “modern” ones that help shape different realities of oppression, have all helped shine a light on questions of knowledge and the politics necessary for decentering the theory and politics of Latin American feminisms. They have also, however, shared in the Northern *zeitgeist* that taught us to regard Marx and the Marxist tradition as reductionist because it was ostensibly “economistic”, and to set it aside. Yet, this was itself a reductionist reading that moved much too quickly to discard (and thus render invisible) what were in effect the foundations that made their own critique possible. In this article I have argued that a review of key categories of the feminist debates with Marx and the Marxist tradition, specifically social reproduction, primitive accumulation, and the ecological limits of capitalism, are fundamental resources for developing a structural understanding of the relation between women and Latin American neoliberal capitalism.

Critique is both political and theoretical, as Marx reminded us over 150 years ago, and as such it always involves, as an embodied act, a “reclamation”, that is, a “rereading and thus a reaffirmation of that which it engages.” A critical Latin American feminism can embrace the need to continue cultivating what decolonial feminists have called an *ecología de los saberes feministas* (an ecology of feminist knowledges) by turning anew to resources that may help us understand the structural relations between women’s oppression, ecological devastation, and capitalism in its present form. Some of this critical re-reading has already begun, as illustrated by the *Red de Feminismos Descoloniales*, (Network of Decolonial Feminisms), a network of feminists who are primarily from Mexico and Central America (Millán, 2014a). The network is committed to building feminist knowledge on the basis of recognition and dialogue with a plural world. In other words, this project of building a *feminismo otro*, another feminism, recognizes the plurality of feminist knowledge being built in multiple spaces and by many voices, especially emergent indigenous voices. And, it involves dialogue and the re-reading *desde abajo y a la izquierda* (from below and to the left) of legacies of earlier popular and critical feminisms as a way forward (Marcos 2014). Theirs is a project of decolonizing feminist thought conceived as a living process of knowledge production, and as part of a broader critical theory of capitalist modernity and its civilizational aims (Millán 2014b).

A critical Latin American feminism aimed at apprehending the present predicament of women in the region, I am suggesting, needs to extend this commitment to producing knowledge

from below and to the left, by reaching further, and engaging critically with Marx and his feminist critics. Given the widespread impact of the present modernity, tethered to neo-extractivism, not only on the lives of peasant and indigenous Latin Americans but also of increasingly broader sectors of rural and urban society, and in particular on the lives of women, it is imperative that we understand the structural nature of the relation between women, capitalism and nature. We await what a review and development of earlier critical feminist thought, rooted in Marx's historical materialist analysis of capitalist economies, and Marx's own insights into the ecological limits of capitalism, will contribute to a revived Latin American critical feminism.

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